2159 Empty Cradle  
  
In the basement of Jest's lavish mansion at the heart of NQSC, behind several layers of armored alloy and defended by a cutting-edge spelltech defense system, lay a square chamber with video walls that displayed a beautiful panoramic view of Rivergate.  
  
There were two sleeping pods installed there side by side — once luxurious and expensive, but now old and obsolete. Jest and his wife had used them once, but since both of them were Masters now and did not venture into the Dream Realm in their sleep, the sleeping pods had just been gathering dust for the last few years.  
  
Not that they were really dusty. The entire mansion was spotlessly clean, both due to robotic cleaners and mundane staff.  
  
But today, one of the pods had an occupant.  
  
Jest's older son was laying there, sleeping peacefully, while Jest himself was sitting on a folding chair nearby and watching him with an expressionless face.  
  
He had been sitting there for two days without moving.  
  
Only his mind was restless and alive.  
  
'Come on, boy… come on. Your old man survived, so you can survive too. You are so much better than me. You can do it...'  
  
It had not taken long for his son to succumb to the Spell after displaying the first symptoms. He was in the First Nightmare now, fighting for his life… and Jest was stuck here — by his side, but unable to help.  
  
He could not help, and at the same time, he felt more helpless than ever before.  
  
Wasn't it funny? Jest had spent the first two decades of his life barely clinging to life, then spent many more years in regular brushes with death. And yet, he had never felt more powerless than now.  
  
Perhaps it was funny, but for the first time since the Spell descended, he could not find the strength to smile.  
  
'Come on…'  
  
Slowly, every conversation he had ever had with Warden were surfacing in his mind. Еverything that the two of them had done — every glorious victory, every triumph against all odds, every noble sacrifice… every dirty scheme, every cold-blooded execution, every innocent life lost as collateral damage in pursuit of greater good — it had all been for this, had it not?  
  
To build a world where their children could live with their heads held high.  
  
They had spilled the blood and built that world, so surely, their children would survive?  
  
Jest had known nothing and had nothing when the Spell called him into the First Nightmare. He did not know how to fight, how to wield weapons, how to procure food, how to find shelter from the elements. He had not known what Aspects were, why Attributes were important, how to harvest and absorb soul shards…  
  
But his son knew it all, and then some. He had been taught and trained by the best instructors in the world, preparing for this day from early childhood. His training had been both thorough and extensive, bordering on excessive… Jest and his wife were among the best warriors of humanity and imparted as much as they could on him, as well.  
  
So, surely…  
  
Jest had never prayed to anyone or anything before, but he was praying now.  
  
Even though the gods were dead, he hoped that something would listen.  
  
He prayed to the gods, to the Demons.  
  
He even prayed to the Nightmare Spell.  
  
'Come on…'  
  
But his prayers had gone unanswered.  
  
…He felt it before he saw it. A subtle, almost imperceptible shift in the atmosphere, as if the air in the underground chamber had suddenly become heavier.  
  
Colder, darker, and more sinister.  
  
It was not really something Jest felt with his body, but rather what he felt with his soul.  
  
His eyes trembled slightly.  
  
In the brightly illuminated cradle of the sleeping pod, his son's eyelids trembled, too.  
  
For a moment, Jest hoped that the little fiend would wake up and open his eyes.  
  
But instead, his son's body twitched, and then arched, a low growl escaping from between his lips.  
  
Something moved under his skin, as if his bones were growing and rearranging themselves, pressing against it from below.  
  
Jest continued to watch silently, paralyzed.   
  
Eventually, though…  
  
He slowly stood up and walked toward the sleeping pod weakly.   
  
Sitting down on its edge, he pulled his son into an embrace and held him tightly, struggling against the movements that were growing more and more fierce.   
  
He tasted it again… the salty taste of tears on his tongue.  
  
So he still had tears to shed, it seemed.  
  
Just like on that day, in front of the barrack.  
  
Jest opened his mouth:  
  
"Shhh…"  
  
He inhaled deeply.  
  
"It's alright, boy. It's alright. You did well… you did the best you could."  
  
Of course, the thing he was holding was not his son anymore.  
  
But Jest just held it tighter.  
  
"It's alright… you did well…"  
  
After a while…  
  
And eternity, perhaps.  
  
Jest left the basement and closed the door behind him.  
  
He knew that his wife was waiting for him upstairs, half-dead from the dreadful anticipation of uncertain news.  
  
He had to tell her now, but was not brave enough to face her just yet.  
  
Instead, Jest turned to the wall and leaned on it, breathing heavily.  
  
The armored alloy felt cool against his forehead.  
  
'Ah…'  
  
His mind was empty.  
  
'Ah...'  
  
Some time later, his gaze focused on his wrist.  
  
There, on the cuff of his expensive shirt…  
  
The white fabric had turned vibrant red with blood.  
  
Jest stared at it for a while, his eyes slowly growing less cloudy.  
  
A crooked smile suddenly split his face apart.  
  
He remembered another bloodied cuff, and a conversation that had happened а long time ago.  
  
What was it that he had said?  
  
'... A bit of collateral damage. Unfortunate, but inevitable. In any case, it went well.'  
  
They had been so matter-of-fact about it. And why wouldn't they? How many of these unfortunate occurrences had there been? He had lost count. If Jest wasted energу caring about each of them — any of them — he would have spent his entire life spilling tears.  
  
He was too busy spilling blood, though. One could not build a new world without mortar, after all, and definitely not without breaking a few bricks… a dozen or a thousand, it did not matter.   
  
But those broken bricks had been someone's sons and daughters, too.   
  
He grinned terribly.   
  
"So… is this my punishment then?"  
  
Was it?  
  
Before Jest knew what he was doing, he brought his head back, and then hit it against the wall, as if wishing to crack his skull open.   
  
But his skull did not crack, of course.   
  
Instead, the armored alloy bent and cracked, and a deep indent was formed on its surface.   
  
He was a Master, after all.  
  
'Ah, ah…'  
  
The world was bitter.  
  
The gods had died, and were replaced by the Nightmare Spell.  
  
And the Spell…  
  
It was a wicked god.   
  
The only kind of god he deserved, perhaps.